

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

October 5, 2006

SCWRP SCIENCE ADVISORY PROJECT

File No. 00-068

Project Manager: Karen Bane

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$500,000 to the Southern California Coastal Water Research Project to implement the Southern California Wetlands Recovery Project Science Advisory Project which will improve design, construction, and monitoring of wetland restoration in all southern California coastal watersheds.

LOCATION: Coastal wetlands and watersheds in southern California from Point Conception south to the Mexican border (Exhibit 1)

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Resource Enhancement

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: Map of WRP Region

Exhibit 2: Letters of Support

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31251-31270 of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the disbursement of an amount not to exceed five hundred thousand dollars (\$500,000) to the Southern California Coastal Water Research Project (SCCWRP) to implement the Southern California Wetlands Recovery Project Science Advisory Project, subject to the condition that prior to the disbursement of any funds, SCCWRP shall submit for review and approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy a work program, budget, schedule and any contractors or subcontractors to be employed for these tasks.”

Staff further recommends that the Conservancy adopt the following findings:

“Based on the accompanying staff report and attached exhibits, the State Coastal Conservancy hereby finds that:

1. The proposed project is consistent with the purposes and criteria set forth in Chapter 6 of the Public Resources Code (31251-31270) regarding enhancement of coastal resources.

2. The proposed project is consistent with the guidelines and criteria set forth in the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted on January 24, 2001."
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PROJECT SUMMARY:

The proposed project would provide a \$500,000 grant to the Southern California Coastal Watershed Research Project (SCCWRP) to implement the Southern California Wetlands Recovery Project (WRP) Science Advisory Project.

The WRP is a partnership of 17 state and federal agencies working in concert with scientists, local governments, environmental organizations, business leaders, and educators to preserve and restore southern California's coastal wetlands and coastal watersheds. A fundamental tenet of the WRP partnership is that resource decisions should be based on the best-available science. To this end, the WRP Working Agreement recommends assembling a panel of wetland scientists to advise the Governing Board on regional goals, objectives, project criteria, and priorities. The Science Advisory Panel (SAP) was formed in 1998 and has been managed by SCCWRP since 2000 (see Project History section).

This grant would provide funds for the Science Advisory Panel to help the Coastal Conservancy and its grantees design, build, and monitor more effective wetland restoration projects in Southern California. This work will include two important priorities recently identified for the Wetland Recovery Project.

Implement Regional Wetland Assessment Program

The SAP has developed a program to assess the overall extent and condition of wetlands in Southern California, track the contribution of specific wetland projects to the regional condition, and answer wetland management information needs. The program framework applies to all wetland types; however, only the indicators for estuaries and lagoons have been selected. The proposed funding would allow the SAP to address riparian wetlands and implement the program for estuaries and lagoons. Specifically, the SAP would do the following:

- Recommend indicators for riparian wetland condition
- Assess the ambient condition of estuaries and lagoons by leveraging statewide funding to implement the program at 60 sites
- Assess the performance of completed WRP restoration projects relative to the region
- Support efforts by partner agencies to fund and adopt the program

Address Restoration Science Uncertainties for Wetland Projects

Many major coastal wetland restoration projects are being planned in Southern California that will be implemented over the next decade. Yet, many fundamental uncertainties continue to challenge the design and long-term management of these projects. These uncertainties include: How do we accommodate potential sea-level rise? Should marsh channels be engineered or allowed to form on their own? To achieve plant diversity, when should plants be installed or allowed to recruit naturally? With the proposed funding, the Science Advisory Panel for the WRP will address these uncertainties.

This project will build on a similar process recently completed to inform restoration planning for

the San Francisco Bay Salt Ponds. The SAP will identify and prioritize key uncertainties, document current knowledge related to those uncertainties, and recommend actions address them as restoration proceeds. The recommendations may include guidance for how to design projects to learn about the particular issue, strategies for designing projects with flexibility, or ideas about how to address the uncertainty in the site management plan.

SCCWRP, a joint powers agency formed among southern California water dischargers and regulators (including five member agencies of the WRP), is an appropriate partner for undertaking activities in support of the SAP because it is a recognized leader in marine environmental research and maintains a multi-disciplinary scientific and technical staff. SCCWRP's mission is to "contribute to the scientific understanding of linkages among human activities, natural events, and the health of the southern California coastal environment, communicate this understanding to decision makers and other stakeholders, and recommend strategies for protecting the ocean environment for this and future generations." Wetlands are an important component of SCCWRP's watershed program.

Site Description: The project area for the Southern California Wetlands Recovery Project is the coastal wetlands and watersheds from Point Conception in Santa Barbara County to the International Border with Mexico.

Project History: In April 1998, the WRP Governing Board approved formation of the Science Advisory Panel (SAP). In June 2000, the Governing Board tasked the SAP with four primary roles, committed to funding a half-time staff person to help carry out fulfill these roles, named Steve Weisberg, Executive Director of SCCWRP, as Chair of the SAP, and added the chair of the SAP to the Governing Board as an ex-officio member. The four identified roles for the SAP are:

- Review policy and project documents as requested by the Governors or the WMG;
- Prepare issue papers as directed by the Governors;
- Develop an agenda for a southern California wetlands research program;
- In partnership with the WMG, County Task Forces, and Public Advisory Committee, convene an annual WRP symposium.

In August 2000, the Conservancy approved a \$49,000 grant to SCCWRP to manage the SAP. An additional \$200,000 was approved in January 2002 for management of the SAP and technical research on issues identified by Conservancy staff as obstacles to wetland restoration in southern California. In December 2003, the Conservancy's contribution to SAP activities were infused with another \$200,000 provided by the California Resources Agency through a Coastal Impact Assistance Program (CIAP) grant from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Currently, SCCWRP staff member Eric Stein is the Chair of the SAP and Betty Fetscher provides staff support to the SAP.

Over the past seven years, the SAP has taken on an ambitious work plan to assist the WRP set priorities and improve projects. Highlights include:

- **Decision Support Tools.** To help the Wetlands Managers Group make decisions on how best to allocate limited resources, the SAP drafted a detailed checklist of ecological criteria for evaluating riparian preservation and restoration projects. In addition, the SAP has been working with NOAA Coastal Services Center on a multi-year project to develop a watershed-

based GIS tool for assessing opportunities for riparian habitat preservation and restoration (SCREAM – the Southern California Riparian Ecosystem Assessment Model).

- **Habitat Quality and Water Quality.** The WRP partner agencies, including the Coastal Conservancy, have been receiving an increasing number of proposals to restore or create wetlands in order to provide wetland habitat while also treating urban runoff. The SAP researched how to design projects to successfully achieve both habitat and water quality goals, as well as to track potentially harmful effects of urban runoff contaminants that may accumulate in the wetlands. After reviewing literature, the SAP concluded there was reason for concern and proposed pre-cautionary design guidelines for multi-purpose wetland projects. The report of findings and recommendations is cited in Request for Proposals for WRP projects. Another WRP partner, SWRCB, is funding research into the function of multipurpose wetlands in arid southern California.

PROJECT FINANCING:

Coastal Conservancy	\$500,000
Total Project Cost	\$500,000

Supplemental funding secured by SCCWRP for SAP projects:

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (WDP)	\$250,000
State Water Resources Control Board (application pending)	\$834,000

Subtotal supplemental funding	\$1,084,000
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The Conservancy’s contribution to the project would be funded with Proposition 50, which allocated funds to the Conservancy for “the purpose of protecting coastal watersheds, including, but not limited to, acquisition, protection, and restoration of land and water resources and associated planning, permitting, and administrative costs.” The proposed project will improve design and monitoring of all Southern California wetland restoration projects funded by the Conservancy, and thus is consistent with the funding source.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The proposed project is intended to assist the Conservancy in meeting its purposes and objectives under Sections 31251-31270 (resource enhancement) by increasing the feasibility and cost-effectiveness of wetland restoration and enhancement projects in southern California’s coastal zone and coastal watersheds.

Section 31251 authorizes the Conservancy to award grants to state and local agencies for the enhancement of coastal resources, which, because of indiscriminate dredging or filling, improper location of improvements, natural or human-induced events, or incompatible land uses, have suffered a loss of scenic and natural values. SCCWRP is a joint powers agency within the meaning of Public Resources Code Section 31010 and Government Code Sections 6500 *et seq.*, which may enter into an agreement with the Conservancy to carry out the recommended authorization. SCCWRP’s activities in support of the WRP will help to carry out coastal resource enhancement

projects identified by the WRP for development and implementation in a cost-effective, scientifically based manner.

Consistent with Section 31251.2(a), the proposed project would address watershed resources that are partly outside the coastal zone in order to enhance the natural and scenic character of coastal resources within the coastal zone. The WRP's partners and member agencies, which have jurisdiction over areas outside of the coastal zone, support the proposed work.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S STRATEGIC PLAN GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):

The proposed project would facilitate the WRP in its efforts to preserve and restore coastal wetlands and watersheds in southern California. Collectively, WRP efforts will help achieve Goals 4 and 5 of the Conservancy's strategic plan. Consistency of the SAP's contribution with each of these goals is discussed below.

- **Goal 5A** – The Regional Wetland Assessment Program and Science of Wetland Restoration Program will improve the design and management of coastal habitat projects.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted January 24, 2001, in the following respects:

Required Criteria

1. **Promotion of the Conservancy's statutory programs and purposes:** See the "Consistency with Conservancy's Enabling Legislation" section above.
2. **Consistency with purposes of the funding source:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
3. **Support of the public:** The Wetlands Recovery Project is a partnership of 17 state and federal agencies working in concert with local governments, business leaders, and environmental organizations. Its efforts to develop and implement a regional strategy for wetlands recovery in southern California enjoy broad support from both the public and private sectors. Support letters are provided in Exhibit 2.
4. **Location:** The project area for the Southern California Wetlands Recovery Project is the coastal wetlands and watersheds from Point Conception in Santa Barbara County to the International Border with Mexico. Portions of the project area are located outside of the coastal zone. WRP efforts benefit coastal resources by providing habitat connections from the coast to inland habitat areas, improving coastal water quality, and improving upstream habitat for anadromous species.
5. **Need:** The Coastal Conservancy serves as staff and project manager for the WRP and is a critical partner for the SAP. Although SCCWRP has been very successful in securing supplementary funding for the SAP, these grants and partnership projects are all dependent on continuing participation and funding from the Conservancy. Without the Conservancy, the SAP would not continue to exist. Since 1998 the Coastal Conservancy has invested more

than \$242,000,000 in acquisition and restoration of coastal wetlands in Southern California; therefore, a significant need exists to understand the success of those projects within the context of the region.

6. **Greater-than-local interest:** One of the primary goals of the WRP is to coordinate wetland acquisition and restoration projects on a regional basis in order to avoid fragmented and piecemeal efforts. The proposed authorization will further the WRP's efforts to develop and implement a regional wetland strategy.

Additional Criteria

9. **Leverage:** See the "Project Financing" section above. To date, the Conservancy has provided \$449,000 to SCCWRP for the SAP, and SCCWRP has secured \$3,920,000. With the \$500,000 recommended in this report, the Conservancy would leverage an additional \$1.084 million (i.e., provide approximately 30 percent of the total cost of future SAP activities).
11. **Innovation:** The SAP is developing several innovative tools to assist the WRP's efforts. For instance, the SAP is partnering with other efforts around the state to develop a rapid assessment tool for wetlands throughout the state. This will enable the State for the first time to assess the condition of wetlands statewide in a consistent and comparable manner.
12. **Readiness:** SCCWRP is ready to continue working on this project immediately.
13. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** See the "Project History" section above.

CONSISTENCY WITH THE COASTAL ACT:

The technical assistance provided through this authorization will further the efforts of the WRP to develop and implement a regional strategy for wetlands recovery in southern California. Thus, the authorization will further the planning and management policies contained in Section 30231 of the Public Resources Code, which state "the biological productivity and the quality of coastal waters, streams, wetlands, estuaries, and lakes appropriate to maintain optimum populations of marine organisms and for the protection of human health shall be maintained and, where feasible, restored. . . ."

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

The proposed authorization does not have the potential to result in any physical changes to the environment and therefore is not a "project" subject to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), as provided in 14 Cal. Code of Regulations Section 15378.